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ABSTRACT

A Francis Christensen-oriented, "generative rhetoric" 12-step approach to sentence skills was used in two English-as-a-second-language composition courses at Wichita (Kansas) State University in 1980. The classes consisted of approximately 50% Middle Eastern students, 35% Southeast Asian students, and 15% African and South American students. Two instruments were used to measure the effect of this instruction. The first was a pair of narrative sentence-combining tasks: "The Chicken," developed by W. Kellogg Hunt (pretest), and "The Nightingale," developed by G. L. Broadhead and J. L. Berlin (posttest). In both tasks, students were presented with strings of short sentences in basic sentence patterns and were asked to rewrite the passages in a better way. The second measure was a 90-item test--the Diagnosis of Syntax and Punctuation Awareness. Each item on this test consisted of a sentence with a slash mark in it; students were to decide what punctuation would be appropriate where the slash mark appeared. Results showed student improvements in words per t-unit, t-unit standard deviation, free modifiers as a percent of all structures, free modifier words as a percent of all words, variety of structural types, punctuation accuracy, and punctuation test score. (HOD)

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Generative Rhetoric in ESL Composition Classes

Abstract

A Christensen-oriented, "generative rhetoric" approach to sentence skills was used in two ESL composition courses. To evaluate its effectiveness, two measures were used on a pre-and-post basis: a sentence-combining task (controlled stimulus passage) and a punctuation test. Students showed desired improvements in words per t-unit, t-unit standard deviation, free modifiers as a percent of all structures, free modifier words as a percent of all words, variety of structural types, punctuation accuracy, and punctuation test score.

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Generative Rhetoric in ESL Composition Classes

Structural linguistics and generative-transformational grammar have transformed ESL teaching in ways recently summarized by Haskell (1978). Modern grammars have also had an impact on college composition courses for native speakers of English--particularly through the sentence-combining approach of Mellon (1969) and Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg (1978) and through the generative-rhetoric approach of Christensen (1978) and Faigley (1979). But while ESL applications of sentence-combining have been reported by Davidson (1977), Kameen (1978), and Zamel (1980), use of generative rhetoric in ESL composition classes has not yet been described, despite Faigley's estimate of the approach's "de-mystifying" value in conventional composition courses: "The experiment demonstrates that generative-rhetoric instruction has the potential to affect greatly the sentences of college students and to improve their writing in general. . . .Instead of a God-given gift, writing becomes a complex skill, like playing a musical instrument, which can be acquired through practice" (1979: 176, 181).

To see whether it might show equal promise in ESL composition courses, the generative-rhetoric approach was utilized under quasi-experimental conditions in two ESL courses at Wichita State University in 1980. These sections consisted of approximately 50 percent Middle Eastern students, 35 percent Southeast Asian students, and 15 percent African and South American students. Except for a few students who were refugees from Southeast Asia, all had scored 500 or better on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Method of Instruction

The method of instruction was based on the twelve-step procedure reported in Broadhead and Berlin (1981). Since that article describes the approach in considerable detail, only a very brief outline will be presented here, along with summaries of adjustments made in each step to meet the needs of international students.

Step 1. Language is a system of structures, and control of writing is aided by an understanding of this system.

Step 2. Most written sentences in English are based on four basic sentence patterns (noun/verb, noun/verb/ noun, noun/linking-verb/noun, noun/linking-verb/ adjective).

While most international students had been exposed to the structural cues of English, most profitted from an emphasis on the article--when to use one, which one to use, and how to handle "count" and "non-count" nouns. Also, analysis of major parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions) was integrated with vocabulary and spelling instruction.

Step 3. Three bound modifiers (adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases) may be inserted into a BSP to form an independent clause, where the key idea of a sentence usually appears.

In this step, international students required considerable attention to idiomatic uses of prepositions.

Step 4. Of twelve kinds of free modifier (FM), the first is the subordinate clause, created by adding a clause subordinator (e.g., "when," "because," "if") to an independent clause. (In the following examples, the structure being illustrated is printed in capital letters.)

WHEN HE HEARD THE NOISE, Jim opened the door.

While international students had little trouble with widely-used clause subordinators such as "because," "when," and "if," explanation of appropriate tense sequences was necessary for words such as "unless" and "since."

Step 5. Four types of free modifier are made through a "cross-over" pattern: the predicate is transformed appropriately and moved to the front of the sentence (and later to other positions, too), while the original subject-noun becomes the subject-noun in a new independent clause. These cross-over FMs include the -ing verb cluster (participial phrase), the -ed/-en or passive-voice verb cluster, the "to" or infinitive verb cluster, the noun cluster (appositive), the list cluster, and the adjective cluster. Beginning with independent clauses such as "Jim whistled softly," "A noise alarmed Jim" ("Jim was alarmed by a noise"), "Jim got outside," "Jim was an expert repairman," "The two things were a door and a window," and "Jim was curious about the noise," the cross-over pattern would result in the following examples:

WHISTLING SOFTLY, Jim opened the door.

ALARMED BY A NOISE, Jim opened the door.

TO GET OUTSIDE, Jim opened the door.

Jim, AN EXPERT REPAIRMAN, opened the door.

Jim opened two things: A DOOR AND A WINDOW.

CURIOUS ABOUT THE NOISE, Jim opened the door.

While the method of producing verb, noun, and adjective clusters was clear to international students, extra attention was devoted to redundancy, in order to repair such sentences as "A smart boy, Mohammed is intelligent" (which became "A smart boy, Mohammed laughs at his teacher's jokes").

Step 6. Two tricky FMs are the absolute (created by removing a helping or linking verb) and a relative clause (created by replacing a noun with a relative pronoun such as "who" or "which").

HIS HANDS TREMBLING, Jim opened the door.

Jim opened the door, WHICH HAD BEEN SEALED SHUT.

International students, like many American students, had a good deal of difficulty recognizing natural-sounding absolutes, which cannot be generated simply by rule. But they produced many usable sentences by applying the formula of beginning with a possessive pronoun plus a noun subject, and then eliminating the helping verb "is" or "was": "Her knees were shaking" becomes "Her knees shaking, Mary delivered her speech."

Although more familiar than absolutes, relative clauses tended to evoke sentences with unnecessary pronouns (duplicating the noun serving as subject): "My sister, who lives in Lebanon, she is a teacher."

Step 7. A final group of very frequently used FMs consists of free adverbs and free prepositional phrases.

SLOWLY AND CAREFULLY, Jim opened the door.

AFTER A WHILE, Jim opened the door.

Step 8. Free modifiers may occur before, within, or after an independent clause (i.e., in initial, middle, or final position), and should be checked for clarity of modification.

AN EXPERT REPAIRMAN, Jim opened the door.

Jim, AN EXPERT REPAIRMAN, opened the door.

The door was opened by Jim, AN EXPERT REPAIRMAN.

Step 9. Sequences of parallel free modifers indicate the logical relationships of the ideas they express. That is, the structural similarity of the members of the sequence usually signals that they are all providing the same kind of information (modifying the same structure in the same way).

2 SKIING DOWN THE HILL,

2 PLANTING HER POLES MECHANICALLY,

1 she strived to perfect her style.

International students had the greatest difficulty writing sentences with parallel sequences of free modifiers (and also with the non-parallel sequences discussed in Step 10). Some students' first efforts were quite good: "Swaying her hips, swinging her purse, and puffing on a cigar, she made quite an impression on her in-laws." Others, however, produced formally adequate but semantically strained sentences such as this: "Happy with his wife, excited by his present, hungry from the nice smell in his house, John has a nice wife." Such sentences were best dealt with by re-converting free modifiers to their independent-clause form, and then devising an appropriate generalization or other type of concept for them: "John led his family to the feast."

Step 10. Sequences of non-parallel free modifiers signal that the free modifiers are modifying one another.

2 WHEN HE PLANTS HIMSELF BEHIND THE LECTERN,

3 SQUAT AND POWERFUL,

4 HIS ROUND FACE BREAKING INTO LAUGHTER,

1 his listeners both love and believe him.

Step 11. Five rules show how internal punctuation signals the relationships between various kinds of free modifiers and independent clauses.

Step 12. Free modifiers are used both to develop ideas in independent clauses (by providing new information) and to link ideas in different structures (sentences, paragraphs, and the like).

Methods of Measuring Change

Two instruments were used to measure the effect of this instruction. The first was a pair of narrative sentence-combining tasks: "The Chicken," developed by Kellog Hunt (pre-test), and "The Nightingale," developed by Broadhead and Berlin (post-test). In both, students were presented with strings of short sentences (basic sentence patterns) and were asked to rewrite the passages in a better way.

The second measure was a 50-item test called the Diagnosis of Syntax and Punctuation Awareness (DSPA). Each item on this test consisted of a sentence with a slash mark in it; students were to decide what punctuation would be appropriate where the slash mark appeared (comma, semicolon, colon, dash, non-punctuation, comma or dash, colon or dash, colon or semicolon, and so forth).

Results and Conclusions

As shown in Table 1, students' performance on the sentence-combining tasks showed improvement in seven of nine areas measured. Statistically significant gains (one-tailed t-test) were made in measures of length, variety, and punctuation accuracy. Of the lenght-oriented items in Table 1, for example, improvement was shown in item (2), the number of words per t-unit ("terminable unit," consisting of an independent clause and its free modifiers), and in item (3), the standard deviation of the T-unit mean, showing flexibility in use of long and short T-units. A statistically non-signficant gain occurred in item (4), the number of words per sentence. Improvement was also evident in the three measures of

variety: item (5), the number of free modifiers, expressed as a percent of the total number of structures; item (6), the number of words in free modifiers, expressed as a percent of the total number of words; and item (7), the variety of structural types (treating each kind of free modifier in each position as a separate type, along with several semantic types of independent clause, such as repeating clauses introduced by a colon). Finally, item (8) shows that punctuation (including terminal marks) improved on the sentence-combining tasks.

On the Diagnosis of Syntax and Punctuation Awareness test, too, the students improved in the desired direction, from a 39.8 average on the pre-test to a 66.6 average on the post-test (an alternate version previously shown to correlate with the pre-test version at the .95 level).

A further perspective on these gains for both measures is provided by comparison with results for native speakers using the syllabus (Broadhead & Berlin 1982). In regard to percent of free modifiers used, native speakers used 34 percent free modifiers before instruction and 39 percent after (a significant gain); international students increased free modifier use from 23 to 38 percent. In regard to words per T-unit, native speakers increased from an 11.49 mean to 12.12; international students increased from 9.72 to 11.36. In regard to structural variety, native speakers increased from 30 percent of available types to 32 percent (a significant gain); international students increased from 18 percent

to 27 percent. And in regard to punctuation accuracy (as measured by the DSPA), native speakers increased from 44 correct (of 90 items) to 57 correct; international students increased from 40 correct to 67 correct. In several important areas, then, the generative-rhetoric approach helped to narrow the gap between native and non-native speakers.

Several pieces of data suggest that the generative-rhetoric approach must be further adapted for international students. First of all, independent clauses were slightly shorter in post-treatment than in pre-treatment. Second, despite an impressive gain in T-unit length, the international students' mean still fell about one word short of the native speakers' mean. Finally, there was no significant gain in clauses per T-unit. All of this suggests that further growth in international students' writing might best be accomplished by increased instruction and practice in the use of embedded and bound clauses, probably by incorporating more sentence-combining exercises in the syllabus.

But while some changes might improve the method used in these classes, the data appear to confirm that the generative-rhetoric approach can be applied successfully to ESL composition classes at the college level. Both directly and indirectly, international students report that this approach removes much (not all) of the mystery about sentencing and punctuating in an English composition.

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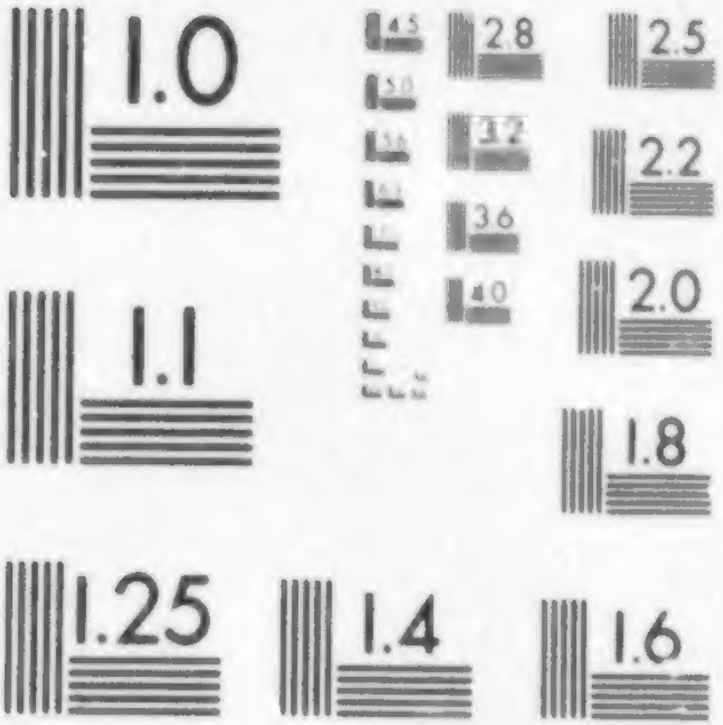

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Table 1. Changes on Sentence-Combining and Punctuation Tasks (with t-Test Significance Levels)

	Pre-Treatment	Post-Treatment	Difference/ Significance
1. Words per independent clause	8.40	7.99	- 0.41
2. Words per T-unit	9.72	11.36	+ 1.64 *
3. T-unit standard deviation	4.60	5.95	+ 1.35 *
4. Words per sentence	13.33	14.32	+ 0.99
5. FMs as percent of all structure	23%	38%	+ 15% ***
6. FM words as percent of all word	13%	28%	+ 15% ***
7. Variety of structural types (% of 44 kinds/positions)	18%	27%	+ 9% ***
8. Punctuation accuracy	74%	85%	+ 11% **
9. DSPA score (90 items)	39.8	66.6	+ 26.8 ***

* s = 0.05

** s = 0.01

*** s = 0.001